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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0458  
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SUBJECT: INFORMATION MINISTER ON BBC KINYARWANDA SERVICE  
CLOSURE

REF: KIGALI 256

Classified By: Ambassador Symington for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (U) On May 11, Information Minister Louise Mushikiwabo addressed the diplomatic corps on the April 25 suspension of BBC Kinyarwanda service FM transmissions in Rwanda (reftel). Flanked by Foreign Minister Rosemary Museminali, Mushikiwabo spoke at length on the history of media in Rwanda and the Government of Rwanda (GOR) rationale for blocking the Kinyarwanda service locally (Note: the service can still be heard on short-wave from London and as a podcast on the BBC website; BBC's French, English and Swahili FM transmissions continue in Rwanda).

¶2. (SBU) Mushikiwabo offered two main critiques of the BBC transmissions, focusing in particular on the weekly Kinyarwanda discussion program called "The Root of Origins." When the program first began broadcasting after the genocide, the BBC had reportedly agreed to provide in this program a "neutral" discussion venue for the Rwandan people on important national issues. She contended this neutrality had been repeatedly violated by a program that interviewed people who offered its audience an implicit and corrosive message. According to some of those participating in this BBC program, she said, the GOR was fooling its people, enslaving them in oppressive "community service" programs, limiting justice to Tutsi families who had suffered during the genocide, and generally pursuing an exploitative and ethnically-based agenda disguised by calls for "unity" and "reconciliation." Second, the BBC show regularly offered opinions providing a "reinterpretation" of the 1994 genocide that amounted to either a denial of the original crime, or an assertion that revenge killings by Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) troops constituted a second genocide -- in either case, denigrating the terrible suffering of the actual genocide. She noted a BBC team would come shortly to discuss the broadcast and the possibility of resuming transmissions.

¶3. (SBU) In response, British Ambassador Cannon offered a stout defense of the BBC, saying the broadcaster had a proud 80-year history of independent broadcasting. The suggestion that the BBC was "conspiring with purveyors of genocide" was farfetched. He expressed the British Government's disappointment at the unilateral decision to halt the broadcasts, wishing that discussions with BBC officials had taken place first. Based upon the BBC's own careful translation of the program, Cannon said no one on the program denied the genocide, and no one proclaimed a second genocide. Rather, a spirited discussion occurred on the nature of

reconciliation and justice in Rwanda. In later comments, the Dutch Ambassador expressed dismay at the decision, saying Rwanda's supporters around the world had difficulty explaining such a closure. Help us to defend you, he urged, by making this sort of decision easier to explain -- give us greater detail, and more examples of language that crosses the line of acceptable speech. At the U.S. Mission, we have made a different point to our GOR interlocutors, namely that reaching an accord with the BBC that results in restarting their service would be a very positive step.

¶4. (SBU) Mushikiwabo replied that genocide denial was "never Q4. (SBU) Mushikiwabo replied that genocide denial was "never straightforward." Any Rwandan listener would believe a second genocide had taken place after hearing an assertion that "all the bodies in Lake Victoria" were Hutu. (Note: many Tutsis killed in 1994 were thrown in nearby rivers and lakes, and many of those ultimately floated into Lake Victoria). "We will not allow the sowing of distrust, the fanning of hatred, the appeal to emotion," she said. When former Prime Minister Faustin Twagirimungu said on the program that he would never kneel and apologize to Tutsis, that message was unacceptable, as it undermined reconciliation. (Note: Twagiramungu went on to explain that many members of his own Hutu family had been killed by Hutu genocidaires, and he could never join a Hutu killer and apologize for the killer's acts). In response to a question, Mushikiwabo also said the GOR was listening "very carefully" to Voice of America Kinyarwanda broadcasts, but added the VOA Kinyarwanda service had "improved" lately.

¶5. (C) Comment. Mushikiwabo defended the GOR decision with great intensity, offering no apologies for the halt in

transmissions, and suggesting that non-Kinyarwanda-speakers would always be at a disadvantage in evaluating such a program. According to the Minister, the BBC in London did not quite understand what was occurring in its own Kinyarwanda programming. The vast majority of radio listeners in Rwanda tune in to Kinyarwanda broadcasts -- they understand no other language as well. Mushikiwabo's assertion that genocide denial is insidious has merit. Nevertheless, the GOR would be best served if it restarted the suspended transmission of the BBC Kinyarwanda broadcasts following upcoming talks with the BBC. Whatever the content of the program that led to the ban, a prolonged suspension will reinforce perceptions that the GOR is intolerant of critical opinion. End comment.

SYMINGTON